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AUTHOR Ferrell, Susan
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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest examines states' goals of rural literacy programs and the types of programs that have proven effective in the past. It includes several definitions of literacy applied by effective rural literacy programs. It also examines the conditions that support or limit widespread influence of effective programs in rural areas. The level of concern about adult literacy in rural areas varies with economic, social, and political differences. Literacy programs vary with the definitions of literacy those areas adopt. Goals for adult literacy programs may include promoting economic productivity, increasing social equity, or stimulating political change. Competency-based programs generally define literacy as the minimum skill required for a high school diploma. Volunteer programs serve adults whose reading achievement is below the fourth-grade level. Community-oriented programs help adults determine their own reading needs. Some U.S. rural literacy projects offer a single service while others offer more, such as tutors, learning centers, and independent-study projects. A scarcity of available funding often limits rural literacy programs. Moreover, the goal of many programs, that of improving the rural economy, can pose a potential threat to program effectiveness. If the expected economic benefits fail to develop, programs can lose the support of external funding sources. Nevertheless, rural literacy programs manage to persist and to succeed for many reasons, among them the involvement of the community in program development, promotion, and evaluation. (TES)

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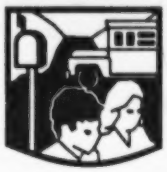

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools June 1990

Adult Literacy Programs in Rural Areas

Digest EDO-RC-90-7

THE LITERACY OF RURAL ADULTS is receiving renewed attention nationally. This Digest examines the stated goals of rural literacy programs and the types of programs that have been effective in the past. It includes the various definitions of literacy applied in effective rural literacy programs. It also examines the conditions that support—or limit—the widespread influence of effective programs in rural areas. Basic research about rural literacy is scanty. This Digest, however, synthesizes findings from the available literature to help inform both concerned practitoners and policymakers.

Concern for adult literacy in rural areas

The level of concern over adult literacy in rural areas varies with economic, social, and political changes. In the United States, policymakers express greatest concern when the need for economic development or recovery seems most pressing, as in the present rural economic crisis.

Many policymakers believe high rates of adult literacy to be a condition of rural economic development. Hence, their concern logically addresses the literacy of citizens with the most visible need to improve their economic well-being, the poor. In the United States, many poor citizens live in remote rural communities. Moreover, throughout the world the rates of both poverty and of adult illiteracy are highest in rural areas (for example, Behrstock, 1981).

The goals of adult literacy programs in rural areas

Knox (1987) reports that adult basic education—including instruction for improved literacy—serves one of four purposes. These purposes are: (1) promoting economic productivity, (2) stimulating political change, (3) increasing social equity, and (4) enhancing quality of life. In the United States, literacy efforts on behalf of rural citizens most frequently address the first of these purposes.

Akenson (1984) develops this theme in his comparison of the Southern Literacy Campaign (1910-1935) with current efforts to promote literacy in the rural South. "Industrial efficiency" was a prime concern of the earlier programs. Today, similar results are expected from programs to prepare rural workers for the "information age." Both efforts emphasize the improved productivity of rural economies (Akenson, 1984).

Another goal of literacy efforts has been to support democratic political reform. The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire with rural peasants best represents this approach. By helping peasants label both their anger and their dreams, literacy campaigns of this type help citizens define their own political destinies. In more highly developed nations, such efforts have also been proposed to address the needs of an emerging underclass (for example, Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985).

Closely related to the political aim of literacy work is the goal of promoting social equity. This goal confronts a particularly vexing challenge. Literacy workers have noted that the nation's poorest citizens, whether rural or urban, are those least likely to participate in programs (Quigley, 1990). According to this view, literacy efforts can actually widen the gap between the "haves" and the "have nots."

Some writers note, however, that this effect is rare: even the poorest citizens get some benefits when the literacy of their somewhat more fortunate neighbors improves. Cameron (1987, p. 175) reasons, "As programs prepare better qualified and motivated people for occupational advancement, lower-level jobs become available for less skilled or less experienced workers."

A final perspective on adult literacy, however, rejects the logic of both of these competing views. Supporters of this view (for example, Kozol, 1985) see literacy as a worthy end in itself. They interpret literacy—like oral language—as the birthright of all humans, and they stress the role literacy plays in cultivating human potential. They believe all political, economic, and social improvement depends on *universal* literacy. In rural areas, this view may have special meaning for post-literacy programs, discussed in the next section.

Rural programs that address various types of adult literacy

Literacy programs in rural areas vary with the definitions of literacy they adopt. Chall, Heron, and Hilferty (1987) identify three types of programs that define literacy in different ways. Volunteer programs work mainly with *illiterate* adults. They serve adults whose reading achievement is below the fourth-grade level. Competency-based programs, on the other hand, work with adults who already have basic reading skills. These adults, however, need more advanced academic skills if they are to become *functionally* literate by modern standards. Competency-based programs usually define literacy as the minimum skill required for a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Fingeret (1984, p. 23) describes programs of these first two types as "individually oriented programs." She faults them for approaching adult illiteracy as deficits of individual persons. These programs, she claims, offer instruction that emphasizes reading skills in isolation from meaningful context.

Both Chall and Fingeret distinguish the first two types of programs from programs based in the community. Rather than valuing just one kind of learning, community-oriented programs help adults determine their own learning needs, based on the norms of their communities. These programs, therefore, provide instruction that may or may not have an academic focus.

A variety of post-literacy options helps sustain the effectiveness of the three basic types of literacy programs. Post-literacy programs offer newly literate adults the chance to continue their education, practice new skills, and make positive changes in their lives.

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Such programs are extremely important for sustaining literacy gains in rural areas. They may be especially critical in rural areas when limited economies keep literate adults from applying their new skills in new jobs. If adult students can see literacy as worthy in itself, then they may be more likely to continue to maintain and develop their literacy, whatever the local economic situation. Hence, programs in rural areas with enduring economic problems might better view the development of literacy in terms of quality of life.

Effective rural literacy projects in the United States

Among adult literacy programs in rural areas of the United States, some offer a single service (Lucas, 1985). Alaska's *Centralized Correspondent Study Handbook for Grades 1-12*, for example, provides the framework through which rural residents can complete correspondence course work at no charge. Teleteacher, a telephone-based system in Virginia, enables rural residents to have access to academic assistance 24 hours a day.

Other rural literacy programs, however, provide a variety of services (Lucas, 1985). For example, a program in Alabama uses a statewide educational television network, learning centers, and home tutors. This plan offers three different ways to reach adults in rural areas. A weekend program in New Jersey offers a variety of counseling services, sponsors independent study projects, and administers subject area examinations.

Some projects offer a wide range of services to large numbers of students (Lucas, 1985). Project Communi-Link, for example, reaches 26 selected rural communities in 14 western states. Communi-Link is a system that structures working relationships among a variety of organizations. It works to help rural communities improve the social and economic well-being of residents through expanded opportunities for Adult Basic Education and GED preparation. Two Pennsylvania projects—Regional Utilization of Resources to Aid Literacy (RURAL) and Grass Roots Alternative Diploma Study (GRADS)—are also examples of this approach.

Finally, technology increases the potential to reach adults in rural areas. Literacy programs are developing out-of-school strategies that use media to deliver instruction. These media include films, newspapers, radios, records, audiotapes, various periodicals, and satellite broadcasts. In addition, some literacy and post-literacy programs have direct ties to business and industry, and others make use of resources available in two- and four-year colleges (Chall et al., 1987; Hone, 1984).

Conditions that support—or limit—effective rural literacy programs

Though effective programs exist, their impact may be limited in rural areas. Some conditions limit the scope, and sometimes threaten the survival, of such programs. Inadequate funding reduces the potential impact of literacy efforts (Kozol, 1985). The funding that does exist may be divided among a variety of agencies, all competing for a share of it. This competition makes it difficult for agencies to coordinate their efforts.

Moreover, the clear goal of many rural literacy programs—improving rural economies—poses a potential threat to even the most effective programs. Despite their goals, these programs nonetheless tend to define their success in terms of increased literacy, not economic improvement. If the advertised economic benefits fail to develop, these programs can lose the support of external funding sources.

Despite these problems, however, rural literacy programs manage to persist and to succeed. Successful programs share certain common features. According to Hone (1984), effective programs address local needs, satisfy the expectations of their clients, entail cooperation among agencies, and promote program benefits in clear language. Kozol (1985) highlights one additional source of success. Involving community members in the development, promotion, and evaluation of literacy programs gives rural residents a stake in making these programs work.

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Prepared by Susan Ferrell, Marshall University, Huntington, WV.

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